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ABSTRACT

Teacher competency testing for the purpose of screening persons prior to state certification continues to be on the upswing in the United States. Many states have implemented paper-pencil tests, most of which were prepared by Educational Testing Service and National Evaluation Systems. Problem areas to consider when certification tests are used to mandate the quality of teacher education programs include: (1) A wedge can develop between the institution and the state department of education. (2) Teaching toward passing the test may occur when a university's instructional program is being evaluated. (3) Excellent programs are not necessarily reflected by test results. (4) Quality may not truly be improved. Requiring certification tests in hiring procedures includes these issues: (1) Shortages in certain teaching fields can develop where many candidates are not passing tests. (2) Certification complications can result, causing delay for applicants. (3) It is uncertain that, with the use of tests, more competent teachers will be hired. (4) Minorities and protected groups may be disproportionately screened from teaching. Testing programs do not necessarily create a positive national image for a state. Negative images can develop within a state when, for example, some institutions display better test performances than others. Recommendations include exploration and projection of issues and problems. If the decision is made to test, then it should be done "to the minimum." Twenty-seven references are included. (CJH)

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An Update on the Ever Growing Momentum of Teacher Competency Testing

Rona F. Flippo

This paper is an abbreviated and updated version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 1985.

Teacher competency testing for the purpose of screening persons prior to state certification continues to be on the upswing in the United States. The testing is usually of the paper-pencil type although teacher performance assessment testing (observing and assessing teachers' performance on-the-job) has been gaining zeal. Sandefur (1985) reports thirteen states that are presently implementing, developing, or planning on-the-job assessment as part of their certification process.

This paper provides an update on the more prevalent paper-pencil type of competency testing activity, as well as a discussion of some of the issues that should be considered by states pondering the development and implementation of these teacher certification or competency testing programs. While certification testing appears to offer a solution to certain problems and issues related to quality control, selection, and public relations, it also raises a series of new problems and issues.

This paper will not attempt to consider the issues and problems surrounding the testing of practicing teachers since this would open up many other issues that must be considered. Also, since the teachers' organizations and unions are against this level of testing (McCarthy, 1985), there is currently not as much activity at this level as at the entry level. However, some states have already implemented or decided to implement recertification testing (Arkansas, Georgia, Texas), while some states do or will consider use of these tests for assignment of salary levels/career ladders (Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, Tennessee), and others have been exploring ideas along these lines. The tendency to expand the "turfdoms" of teacher competency testing is strong (e.g., the Georgia legislature has recently passed an education-reform act which includes career ladder testing *and* extensive recertification testing, Olson, 1985). We will surely be hearing more about this level of teacher testing in the future, especially from a legalistic perspective.

EA 018 743

Competency Testing Activity Updated

Delineating which states are involved with the entry and certification level types of teacher competency testing, where they are in their involvement, and what tests they are using or planning to use is not an easy or exact task. Since the movement is growing and is often a *very* political endeavor, situations can and do change rapidly. Even though a state has not announced or mandated plans for a program, there may be those in the state who are contemplating such a program. As pointed out in a 1984 article (Flippo & Foster), between the time that article was written and its publication (only about 6 months later), the situation had already changed. Certainly, since discussing the states' activities for another paper (Schnittjer & Flippo, 1984), the activities had increased for many states and the number of states involved at different levels had also grown. Additionally, since presenting a more in-depth version of this paper in April 1985 (Flippo) more commitments toward teacher competency testing activity have been made by the states.

Most of the paper-pencil teacher testing is being done by Educational Testing Service (ETS) or National Evaluation Systems (NES), although some states are using other tests (Colorado requires the California Achievement Test (CAT); Oregon uses the California Basic Skills Test). Basically, there are two choices regarding the selection of tests that could be used for competency/certification testing: existing tests, or customized tests. The ETS tests are usually existing standardized tests and the NES tests are usually "customized" tests. The tests from ETS can be validated for use in a state (McCarthy, 1985; NTE Policy Council, 1983) and meet the Uniform Guidelines content (1978). The customized tests from NES can be developed to meet a state's certification areas, and also can be validated to meet Uniform Guidelines (McCarthy, 1985; Rubinstein, McDonough, & Allan, 1982).

Where are the states *now* in their involvement, or who is doing what? Many states do have some sort of testing program in place and are fully implementing those programs (Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia). In other states, testing programs are still at some stage of development (i.e., all planned testing is not as yet implemented) and plans are that they will be fully implemented between 1985 and 1987 (Connecticut, Hawaii, Indiana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, Texas, and West Virginia). Several other states have decided to test competency, but have not made commitments yet regarding which tests they will use. Plans indicate that programs will be implemented by the close of 1988 (Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Washington). In some states with already existing competency testing programs, planning or discussion is underway to expand testing to other levels. For example, Geor-

gia and Oklahoma are planning for career ladder testing of their already practicing teachers.[1]

Finally, in other states, the issue of teacher competency or certification testing is still being explored. Sandefur (1985) reported these states as Illinois, Maryland, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Since that report, Illinois has already enacted legislation, and Minnesota, not previously cited as a state considering the testing, also enacted legislation to test the competencies of new teachers. As pointed out in my April 1985 paper, there are many questions, issues, and problems that should be asked or addressed *before* a state takes the teacher certification testing plunge.

Issues and Problems Raised

Quality

Can quality really be improved by certification testing? Some states (Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Oklahoma) claim that it can ("State Activity," 1980; Scherer, 1983); however, their evidence usually consists of rising test score data. Educational researchers have questioned the validity of the data and improvement of teacher quality claims (Kauchak, 1984; McPhee & Kerr, 1985; Sykes, 1983; Weaver, 1984). When the data and the circumstances surrounding the issues are better understood, it becomes evident that rising test scores indicate no more than that more persons are able to *pass* the tests.

When using certification tests to mandate the quality of teacher education programs and the products of those programs, certain issues and problem areas should now be carefully considered.

A wedge develops between colleges/universities and the state department of education. The use of the test is usually perceived as a measure of the quality of the universities, faculties, and their teacher education programs. Even though a state department of education may deny it, the idea is undeniable, if a state chooses to test the products of the teacher education programs. The universities feel strongly that their graduates are competent. To test them puts the universities on the defensive (Jacobson, 1985). Rather than act on a collegial relationship with the department of education, adverse or even hostile relationships often develop.

Results from these tests are often compared. Data indicate the pass/fail rates at each institution. Some institutions do far better than others. These comparisons are never fair, given the different populations of students that often attend the different institutions within the state.

1. Information for this update of states' activities regarding competency testing was extrapolated from the following sources: Allan (1985), Bosworth (1985a), Bosworth (1985b), Flippo (1985), Flippo and Foster (1984), Sandefur (1985), and Schnittjer and Flippo (1984), as well as from the additional research of this author.

The testing also often causes a rift between the different faculties/programs at the universities and the education faculties/programs. Many who finish a teacher certification program take their major coursework from other programs. For instance, the pre-service history teacher takes most of his/her coursework from the social sciences or history department. If that person is not later successful passing the certification test, the teacher education program often is given the responsibility. This rift between university programs is not a healthy one. It goes further in causing negative feelings between the universities and the state department of education.

Teaching toward passing the test. When it eventually becomes obvious to the universities' faculties that their programs are being compared and/or that their students' abilities to pass the test are reflecting on their programs' images or even survival, the trend to teach toward the test rears its ugly head. Minimum competencies can become the curriculum. Most school systems instituted the widespread minimum competency testing of children between 1975 and 1980 and have had to grapple with this issue. Even so, evidence indicated by the recent major studies in education show that our schools and children are still not up to par. As a matter of fact, they may be suffering from the mediocrity that competency testing tends to promote. Research has indicated that this widespread testing can often retard rather than advance the interests of students, since bureaucratically sanctioned testing tends to place more focus on the tests than on the substance of what the tests are intended to measure (Haney, 1984).

In some colleges/universities in some of the states implementing certification testing, pop courses or program courses have developed on "how to pass the test." Since the objectives or content of the tests are available (and often even promoted), these courses focus on those objectives. When students taking the course have already experienced the test, remembered test questions are recorded and studied. Many testing programs use the same questions over and over again, rotating questions only when they have been used to test several hundred examinees. For some tests with a relatively small number of examinees (for teaching fields that do not attract large numbers of persons), test questions can remain the same for *years* of administrations. Naturally, test scores go up.

Excellent programs are not necessarily reflected by test results. Universities that abhor the concept of mediocrity are not necessarily rewarded by students automatically passing the test. Sometimes those who know more, read more into the questions. Their knowledge of the most recent research and literature can cause many choices in addition to the "correct one" to be plausible. Again, mediocrity (or not knowing as much) can become rewarded, and excellence can be punished. Some of these excellent programs can be put on probation or even abolished for consistent evidence that their students do not do as well on the test as those programs that might be teaching the test.

Problems caused by programs with low pass rates. What about the colleges/universities who consistently have low passing rates? What is to be done? Should the programs be put on probation or closed down? Should *more pressure* be put on the programs to get students to pass the tests? Should the results be ignored because the issue is too embarrassing, awkward, or sensitive to handle? For instance, what if the programs are in colleges/universities with large minority populations? These are issues that should be dealt with and agreed upon *before* a testing program is planned. If the state spends large amounts of money to institute a testing program, what is to be done with the results of those tests? If they are ignored, why bother to give them? If they are not ignored, how will the state deal with these sensitive problems?

Test scores eventually tend to rise because the questions, objectives, or content are known. This screens out fewer and fewer persons. Since the purpose of the testing should be to screen out persons who are not competent enough to teach in the schools, tests with known questions or content become less and less effective at screening the more they are administered. How does the state deal with that? Are the tests continued anyway and are persons virtually "rubber stamped" into the profession? Are the cut-scores raised? How will rising scores be handled? Perhaps the rise in scores will be handled as a public relations move to indicate that the teaching has caused an improvement in teacher education in the state?

What about those who still do not pass? After repeatedly taking the test, some persons still cannot pass it. In most states the tests can be taken over and over again, but there are always some who never seem to be able to pass the test (i.e., really only a relatively small number of persons do not *eventually* pass the tests when programs have been in existence for several years and examinees persevere by repeatedly taking the tests). Are they in a minority/protected group? Are they a VIP to someone with influence at the state level (i.e., the granddaughter of a member of the legislature, the son of a school board member, the daughter of the superintendent's next door neighbor, the assistant principal who is being groomed for principal and *needs* to pass the test first)—more problems for the state department of education. In some instances, situations can conceivably get so embarrassing that some examinees may be given "special attention," like extensive tutoring, until they finally "just pass" the test.

In some states, study guides are developed to get some of the pressure off the state and/or off the universities. These study guides often give examinees tips on how to take the tests, how to study for them, and include sample test questions and references to use in order to prepare for the objective or content being tested. The study guides can be costly to develop. While they are initially a positive attempt, they can also result in problems. If they are good, test scores might rise further without improving quality. If the guides do not help persons having

severe problems, they could be discredited as poor or inadequate study guides.

Has quality been improved or diminished? Just passing the test does not indicate quality. In fact, it might negate quality. There is often no way to compare or identify the individuals who "just pass the tests" with the individuals who "topped out on the tests." Both groups show up as pass data. The bottom line is: Is quality *really* improved? Are programs *really* better? What has *really* been accomplished?

Selection

Can hiring practices really be improved by requiring certification tests? Will more qualitifed teachers be selected for open teaching positions? How will selection of teachers be affected? Will the certification policies and practices of the state be enhanced? And, finally, will the state attract more able and qualified teachers for its open positions? None of these questions can be answered empirically. The issues and resulting problems however should be carefully considered to provide a more accurate guess at the answers.

Shortages in certain teaching fields. There are already shortages in some teaching fields. Will additional shortages develop in fields where people are not passing tests? Or, will the available applicants in a field be diminished further by some applicants either not passing the test or choosing not to take the tests? If this happens, will others not as prepared for those fields be given temporary certificates or permission to teach in those shortage fields? Or will those in surplus teaching fields be asked to teach in shortage fields until prepared persons are recruited and pass the tests to become certified? In some states this does happen. (See Feistritzer, 1984 for details on the tremendous number of persons on emergency or probational certificates in the states.)

Certification complications. Will the tests add to and/or complicate the already time-consuming certification hassles that prevail in many states on *both* sides: the clerical problems for the state departments of education, and confusion and delay problems for the applicants? (Feistritzer indicates that "The certification of classroom teachers in the U.S. is a mess," p. 36) Will it sometimes appear that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing? In some states already implementing competency/certification programs, the teacher testing program is a separate unit from the teacher certification program.

What about experienced teachers and other qualified applicants coming from out-of-state? Would this testing requirement discourage them? Would they see it as "one more hoop to jump" and decide it may not be worth it?

Finally, what about reciprocity? What if someone took a state required test somewhere and wanted the new state to accept it in lieu of its

own test? Most of the states involved with these certification testing programs are adverse to reciprocity concerning the tests. In fact, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has been trying for some time to promote reciprocity on testing and has so far failed (Cornett, 1982). States adopting or developing the testing programs tend to make a case for the uniqueness of the teaching objectives and curriculum in their state from those in other states. This perceived uniqueness is one of their major justifications for requiring that everyone take and pass the tests before being certified.

Hiring practices by the LEAs. With use of the tests, will more competent and excellent teachers be hired? Since often only pass/fail results are given to the LEAs, principals, and others making employment decisions, it is possible that decisions will be made with less information available on applicants than if GPAs, student teaching grades/evaluations, recommendations, and experience were the criteria for selection. Of course, an LEA can decide or be allowed to use all the criteria. If so, given the limited information from the pass/fail score, that test information would be relatively useless. But if LEAs were pressured or required to use only the results of the state test, then certification tests might actually have a negative effect on selection of the most qualified individual. For instance, some persons advocating mass state testing programs argue that since grades and the criteria for them vary so much from institution to institution, the test results are an equalizer. If it is not possible for those doing the hiring to distinguish between someone "who has just passed," perhaps after five or six tries, and someone who passed and did very well on his first try, less competent teachers may be hired.

Minority/protected groups. Who is being screened from the teaching profession? Will more minorities/protected groups be screened from teaching because of lower pass rates on the tests? In states where the testing programs are already implemented, the results indicate that more minorities/protected groups are being screened out than the majorities (Kauchak, 1984; McCaffery, 1984; Smith, 1984, 1985). How will the state deal with that data once it is collected? Legal issues here are *not* the problem. The major test developers, ETS and NES, are very attuned to the legal issues. As pointed out earlier, they have tried to develop and/or validate their tests to hold up in court. However, two recent complaints in Texas and Alabama were filed because of the adverse effects on minorities. In Texas, the injunction has led to the test results not presently being used. The complaint is that the state is not doing anything to "remediate" the weaknesses of candidates they are screening out. In Alabama, NES settled out of court to the litigation resulting from the adverse impact on blacks and black colleges.

The problem is that the data does show that the minorities do not fare as well on the certification tests as the white population. This is a major issue and a state implementing a program will have to deal with it even though it does hold up in court.

Public Image

Questions, issues, and problems regarding public image and politics vary considerably from state to state. However, when image and politics are the decisive pressures for instigating a teacher competency testing program, a state should look at the possible long-run issues and new public image problems that can arise from implementing such a program.

National image problems. Teacher certification testing programs do not necessarily create a positive national image for the states implementing them. For instance, prominent educators or other informed citizens might ask, "What was wrong with the teacher education programs, or with education, in that state in order to cause that state to institute such a large and costly program?" Researchers and authors of papers on the competency testing of teachers movement have already pointed their fingers at the South. They have implied that there has been an education problem in the southern states and that is why the SREB strongly recommended teacher testing ("The Need for Quality," 1981). That is why, they have implied, most of the southern states have jumped on the teacher testing bandwagon and the teacher testing programs mushroomed in the South.

The continued low public image of the South's education systems is still evident in statements that southern leaders sometimes make about themselves. For instance, some southern superintendents were reported as opposing the plan of the Council of Chief State School Officers, a collective of state-level superintendents, to develop a system of national indicators that can be used by the public for state-by-state school comparisons and can be used by states to measure their educational progress, because they said "their states were likely to show up on the low end in terms of achievement." ("Top State Education Officials Support Indicators," 1985).

Local image problems. Once a program is implemented and data is collected, several negative images and feelings can develop within a state: (a) A negative image of some of the colleges/universities can develop when some institutions do better than others on these tests; (b) a negative image of some of the minority groups can develop if some groups do better than others on these tests; (c) a negative feeling can develop from the general public when they learn how much these testing programs cost; (d) a negative feeling, in general, about teachers can develop when the public learns that some of them can't pass the tests. Does that mean that some of the teachers who were certified in the past could not pass these tests? ("My child's teacher could be one of those!"); (e) a negative feeling toward further support of education can develop. Already tight money for education programs *for children* can get even tighter when the public and the legislature know how much extra they are already spending on the teacher competency testing program.

Recommendations

This paper has painted a rather negative picture of the problems and issues surrounding teacher certification testing programs. It was meant to. Teacher certification testing is not the "final solution" or panacea for pressures regarding quality, selection, and public image. If teacher certification testing is implemented, a whole new set of pressures and problems regarding quality, selection, and public image must be handled. There is a trade-off. What appears to be an expedient solution now may prove to put the states, the universities, and the future teachers in a vicious circle.

My recommendations are fairly simple: (a) explore all these pressures, issues and potential problems extensively; (b) project the implications five or ten or more years from now; and (c) if a decision is made to test, then do it *to the minimum*.

Do it so that it will not create adverse relationships between the state department of education and the universities. Do it so that it will not negatively affect the quality of programs and cause "teaching to the test." Do it so that it is not another burden for taxpayers and so that it does not add fuel to the public image fires concerning teacher quality and expenses for education. Finally, do it so that it does not cause *anyone* to point a finger at *anyone else*.

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